

*CURRENTS* – January/February, 2007

## **Montana Boatbuilders.**

Owners Jason and Vedra Cajune work hard and their reward is a growing business; in 2006 they expected to build about 20 boats and sell an additional 30 kits. They employ four people in their small shop complex near the Yellowstone River. Jason, 35, learned the boatwright's craft from his family, which maintained a summertime fleet of wooden fishing boats and launches on the lakes of Glacier National Park.

Cajune does his own designing, which presently includes six models, from 13' to 17' long. He says a high school class teaching rudimentary AutoCAD was sufficient to enable him to draw and fair parts for his ShopBot CNC machine, which he credits with making his operation more efficient and increasing output. He's reduced the construction man-hours for a 16' Recurve from 400 to about 300. Some orders are purely custom, like the cartoppable, two-man boat he's presently doing for the head of the Orvis Company, Inc.

Construction is stitch-and-glue, a method Cajune learned while working for Devlin Designing Boatbuilders in Olympia, Washington. Side panels are two scarfed sheets of 9mm (3/8") okoume plywood. The preformed 19mm (3/4") bottom is a honeycombed sandwich of Kevlar and fiberglass. The sides and bottom are temporarily fastened with short lengths of bailing wire fed through holes in the side and twisted on the outside with pliers. The joints are filled with wood flour and epoxy fillets, and then tabbed with 1202 biaxial 'glass.

The bottom is covered with a high-density polyurethane material, which enables the boats to bounce off rocks without damage. The floor is coated with a rubberized truck bed liner that provides excellent traction and can tolerate a dropped tool with impunity. Though the liners add about 40 lbs. to a boat's weight, Cajune says his boats still are about 100 lbs. lighter than aluminum. Plus, he says, "The chines don't chip out like soft gelcoated fiberglass chines do."

Each autumn, Jason and Vedra host what they a 'boat show' on the banks of the Yellowstone River. It's really more of a rendezvous in which anyone who likes drift boats is invited. It's an opportunity to float the river between banks of changing aspen and cottonwoods, try out different models, talk shop with other owners and eat well.

"This year my wife and I floated a 17' Kingfisher Recurve model between Loch Leven and Mallard's Rest. The current at this time of year is slow. We didn't bother fishing, just enjoyed handling the 9' Sawyer oars, spinning in the eddies, avoiding rocks and feeling humbled by the wild crags and the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness rising eastward above us. Already there were tracings of snow on the peaks. One doesn't have to fish to love drift boats, and I am sure that God did not subtract those hours floating from our allotted time on land."

*Montana Boatbuilders, 26 Pine Mountain Rd., Livingston, MT 39047; 406-222-0866; [www.montanaboatbuilders.com](http://www.montanaboatbuilders.com)*